



Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Dark Side of Conformism: A Critique of the 1950s Domesticity and Gender Ideology in *Revolutionary Road* (2008)

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The Dark Side of Conformism: A Critique of the 1950s Domesticity and Gender Ideology in *Revolutionary Road* (2008)

For better or worse, the 1950s decade in the U.S. has been regarded as the most conformist and conventional decade of the twentieth century. The aftermath of World War II gave rise to a new global order known as the Cold War. The Iron Curtain divided the world into two: the Capitalist side formed by the Western Bloc (USA and its NATO Allies) and the Communist side, or Eastern Bloc, formed by the Soviet Union and its Allies. As Soviet expansion continued, the U.S. adopted a policy of ‘Containment’ that involved the union of military, economic and diplomatic forces to “contain” any further Soviet Communist advance (Boyer 2011: 817). The scare about the growth of communism in the U.S. increased as the Cold War worsened. In 1947 during Truman’s presidency, a new committee, the House Un-American Activities (HUAC), was created to investigate such feared anti-American behavior. The phenomenon of ‘The Second Red Scare’ influenced millions of Americans personal actions since they were subjected to security investigations to ensure they were not related with any activity close to communism. (Boyer 2011: 830). The 1950s became a conservative decade because any criticism of American policies, especially towards foreign policy, could be understood as a disloyalty to the country. Consumerism, for instance, was encouraged to reinforce American capitalist way of life as a strong form of nationalism.

Consumption as a national duty was possible thanks to the country’s economic improvement during the war years. The economic growth that the country experienced due to the saved money from wartime work and service, around \$135 billion, was further stimulated by encouraging Americans to consume. The prosperity experienced

by the families due to the rise of incomes allowed them to purchase everything that commercials advertised and if they could not afford it because they did not have enough cash, they could buy it on credit, as they were urged by the words “Buy Now, Pay Later” (Boyer 2011: 852) that accompanied the credit cards new style of payment. The country reached an unprecedentedly high living standard that afforded Americans the label of ‘affluent society’, a term that gives the title to the book written by John Kenneth Galbraith in 1958, which deals with the families’ fulfilment of the American Dream in the 1950s as a result of that economic growth.

Consumerism assumed a political dimension and became a capitalist weapon against Communism. To Aaserød Øisang, Americans were the new warriors of what she calls the ‘war of consumerism’ and their necessity of showing their way of life as the triumph of Capitalism. In a Nixon-Khushchev meeting in 1959, known as the ‘kitchen debate’, the American President based his discourse on the idea that American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, a place where the latest appliances are found and where the distinct gender roles inside the family are clearly differentiated. Consumerism was understood as a weapon against Communism (May 1988: 19). Inside the homes, consumerism was particularly carried out by women. They were encouraged to believe that consumerism was something that empowered them because it gave them the opportunity to choose ‘freely’ the appliances they needed.

Money transformed middle class people into solvent ones, which contributed to a new phenomenon of urban exodus called ‘white exodus’: an internal migration of almost 20 million Americans who moved from the city to the suburbs in the decade. In 1947, Levitt used a mass-production construction technique to construct 17,000 look-alike houses: “Deeds to the property required door chimes, not buzzers, prohibited picket fences, mandated regular lawn mowing, and even specified when the wash could

be hung to dry in the backyard. All the town streets curved at the same angle. A tree was planted every twenty-eight feet.” (Boyer 2011: 851). This urban uniformity, together with the historical rise in car sale, transform American society and its lifestyle: middle class Americans were eager to get married and have children, which increased the birth rates to extraordinarily high numbers: a baby boom in the late forties and fifties was evident. “In 1945 an incredible 31 percent of white women thought the ideal number of children was four” (Filene 1986: 66). These are the seeds of ‘Suburban America’, a social phenomenon developed mainly in the Northern states of the U.S. created in order to achieve the American Dream for many families who desired to own their homes in safe neighborhoods with safe streets and good schools for their children.

The social phenomenon of suburbia was going to be the sphere for the main element that shaped the new lifestyle of the 1950s: the new American Family, which was going to be directly influenced by the Cold War ideology. The world was considered insecure and families became bastions of stability. The popular *McCall's* magazine uses the term ‘togetherness’ for the first time in 1954. It refers to what the ideal family was supposed to achieve: a married couple whose lives were devoted to building a home where they could raise their children happily. The term also implies the idea that each member of the couple must consider the other as a partner who is going to help her/him to make decisions and resolve problems (Filene 1974: 172). The emphasis in staying together against the adversities built the path to ‘domesticity’. That new ideology is going to redefine women’s role, who are going to get back to their homes after taking part of the work force during the Second World War, leaving their work places to men, the ones that had been in the battlefield and now have to assume a new role as ‘breadwinners’. Women’s new role implies to be a full-time mother and a helpmate to their husbands. Luedtke explains that this new ideology of domesticity

glorifies their role as homemakers and mothers and describes the boundaries of women's roles, "Women are expected to concentrate on making the home a perfect place and on a child rearing, rather than on being economic partners in the family" (Luedtke 1987: 247-248). This new life style was going to be adopted in the entire society as the perfect model for family life. As Elaine Tyler May explains, the new consensus about the importance of the family appeared as an attempt to ensure people's economic stability. This stability would be reached if each member of the couple were totally aware of her/his role. In the 1950s the traditional gender roles "became a central feature of the modern-middle class home" (May 1988: 24). Conforming to traditional gender roles became politically important because having a defined social order without dissenters meant to be stronger than the enemy and that people agreed to government measures.

This essay will study gender and social relations in the 1950s and their underlying tensions through the analysis of Sam Mendes's *Revolutionary Road* (2008), a film adaptation of the eponymous novel by Robert Yates, published in 1961. Mendes, a British film director, became well known for a previous film, *American Beauty* (1999), where he attacks the lifestyle of American middle-class. By focusing on the protagonist couple and their social relations, the analysis will reveal the film's critique of the 1950s' domesticity and gender ideology. Like Yates's denunciation of suburban American in the fifties decade, Mendes uses a film adaptation of his novel to attack the new endorsement of those same values on domesticity and gender roles in the first decade of the twenty-first century. After the terrorist attacks of Al Qaeda in 9/11, an overwhelming atmosphere of fear in the United States led the media to promote the values of the Cold War era: family togetherness and traditional gender roles, as Susan

Faludi has criticized in her book *The Terror Dream Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (2007).

My analysis is organized into six main parts dealing with themes that are related with the study of gender and social relations in the films. Firstly I will talk about the young couple that plays the main roles of the film. Secondly I will analyse April's incapacity of adaptation to the suburban lifestyle of the 1950s. Then I will focus on the suburban home as a claustrophobic place where the internal conflicts of the couple/family flourish and how those conflict lead to April's awakening. Then I will deal with the study of the importance of appearances and social relations in the suburban life, and the fifth and final theme will be an analysis of Frank's fear to emasculation due to possible changes in his comfy life and how he is going to use that fear against April, who is going to become the scapegoat of the couple in her fatal attempt to escape from the entrapment of the decade's suburban life and conformism.

An Unexpected Meeting

The film opens with a scene of bohemian party at night in the city of New York in 1947, just after the end of WWII and seven years earlier of the narrative present of the film. This scene does not only introduce the main characters but also the core conflicts regarding men's conformist attitude in the 1950s as well as women's need to escape from the entrapment of the suburban society in the decade. The place is full of people but a man and a woman are presented to the spectator by using medium-shots, which makes them to stand out from the crowd and emphasize their figures and their facial expressions when they exchange looks for the first time. These characters are April Jonhson (Kate Winslet) and Frank Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio).

April Jonhson wears a black dress that highlights her blonde hair. She is introduced as a smoker, which gives her a kind of sexy touch. She smokes as the rest of the artists there, those who probably share her ambitions, and she is going to continue smoking all her life, a symbolic gesture of her enduring intellectual interests and aspirations. She is a kind of bohemian woman whose main objective is to be an actress and escape from the ideal of women as mothers and housewives that is being imposed by the new conformist society that endorses the mores of domesticity and togetherness to fit the perfect lifestyle of the 1950s, while rejecting the role of women in the work force during the past decade.

Franklin Wheeler looks very simple and unsophisticated while talking with his friends as if they were the only people he knows in the place. He wears clothes anything but sexy, it makes him look what he is, a young ex-combatant who is trying to survive working hard as a longshoreman. He came back home from the battlefield in France just a few years earlier.

When they finally meet, their conversation makes clear that April is a woman with aspirations and she expects Frank to have his own when she asks “What do you do?...I don’t mean how do you make money. Mean what are you interested in?” In the scene when April talks with such self-confidence, the spectator realises she is a woman that is going to follow her own principles and that she is going to voice them. The opposite happens in Yates’ novel, where Frank is the one that defines April. The presentation of women through a male perspective is a narrative device that served to illustrate women’s voiceless situation during the Cold War years. Unlike the novel, the film characterizes April as a woman with her own voice and subjectivity, an important change from her characterization in the novel. In the film, April’s perspective is in constant conflict with Frank’s.

On the other side, Frank tries to impress April as he has done his whole life with the girls that succumbed to his appeal, but he knows April is not like the others and she makes him feel quite insecure. Frank tries to get out of that situation because he has no answer for April’s question. At the end of the dialogue the viewer has already realised that Frank is the kind of man without any aspiration but to live as the rest of the people do: to get a paid job and a woman to create a new family and be the father of two kids, a boy and a girl preferably. Barbara Ehrenreich describes perfectly the role that a man in the fifties is supposed to achieve, which coincides with Frank’s attitude towards life, “in the 50’s...there was a firm expectation (or as we would now say, ‘role’) that required men to grow up, marry and support their wives.” (Ehrenreich 1983: 11)

Failed Female Aspirations in the Suburban Stage

A cut takes the viewer to the couple's life together seven years later, in 1954, the narrative present of the film. The two scenes are linked by the diegetic overlapping song. The lyrics of the song, "I know my lover is true and will come back to me someday" are heard by Frank in the auditorium as if he was remembering the first time he heard it and realizing how things have changed in seven years, and how distant April is now.

Frank is seated in the high school auditorium. A close-up shows his face is full of tension while he is watching his wife April on stage in a very amateur play performed by the Laurel Players, a company made up of the neighbours of the suburb. The stage is shown by a long shot presenting the crowded auditorium and all the actors and the clothes used for their characterizations. A medium close-up shows April's face about to cry at the same time she tries to find any sign of empathy in Frank's face, but she cannot. The only image she can see is Frank's and the audience's disappointing faces. When April and the rest of the players vow to the audience, a *plain Américain* shows clearly April's disappointment. Although she has performed the play, she remains silent because she, as the rest of American women in the 1950s, has no chance to demonstrate who she is. As one of the women who explained her situation in Friedan's work, *The Feminine Mystique*, saying "I feel as if I don't exist" (Friedan 1963: 10), April is the representative of a whole generation of women who could not defined themselves outside their roles as housewives and mothers.

The stage scene symbolises the importance of performance in the suburban society in order to keep appearances and fit the established roles of the 1950s. Matek in her essay entitled *Desire and the Other in Richard Yates' Revolutionary Road* describes

this scene as if the stage symbolizes the real world and April's failure to do a great performance means her inability to be recognized and accepted by her community, which makes her a very unsatisfied woman. (Matek 2011: 4) April's attitude in the car after the show reveals her disappointment with herself and for the first time she wakes up and begins to express her real feelings: she does not want to continue acting, nor on stage nor in real life, that is why she adopts a defiant attitude and begins to perform the role of a woman who cannot stand the situation the suburban society has imposed on her.

The car scene perfectly suggests the feeling of entrapment suffered by the couple. The sense of entrapment is visually conveyed through framing that shows the couple in the car looking ahead hoping to arrive home as soon as possible. A medium-shot shows the uncomfortable situation both are feeling for being physically close to the other as if the car were too small and enclosed, a cage where they cannot escape. April feels especially trapped in the car as well as she will feel in her home, beside a man she does not love any more. "Just because you've got me safely in this little trap, you think you can bully me into feeling whatever you want!"

April's feeling of entrapment, together with her the disappointment about her life, has contributed to the creation of a negative image and adverse feelings towards the figure of her husband. Frank is not the man he used to be when they first met. He has adapted too easily to the ideal of masculinity of the 1950s and that is precisely what April rejects, because although Frank has given her a family, a house and a car, for her, the young Frank with whom she spent funny moments has become what David Riesman described in his book *The Lonely Crowd*, an 'other-directed' man (Riesman 2001: 19); a new type of person that differs from the 'inner-directed' people in that the new type can be easily influenced by others, mainly the mass media and friends. The breadwinner of

the 1950s is perfectly suitable to fit the role of the ‘other-directed’, because he is absolutely influenced by what society dictates, as in Frank Wheeler’s case. April wants to make him wake up and realise how society has turned him into a kind of person she has begun to despise. “Look at you! Look at you, and tell me how by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!” Frank reacts violently and tries to beat her. Frank feels attacked by April because it is his wife who is questioning his masculinity. The masculinity she demands from him is other than the figure of the breadwinner or the authoritative husband. April just wants a mate to empathize with, one who is aware of her problems and aspirations, something that differs from the type of masculinity the conformist society of the 1950s demands. Then they get into the car and both realise everything they ever had is over. Now both are trapped, although Frank will never admit it.

The stage and car scenes introduce the key themes – the importance of public performance and masculinity – that will be narratively unfolded in the film. The questioning of Frank’s masculinity and his fear of emasculation is constantly present in the story and related with every decision he has to make regarding April’s desire to change her life and escape from that entrapment.

The Suburban Home as a Golden Cage

After the title, the Wheelers are shown as a couple that fulfill the ideal role society has imposed on them: a detail shot of the Wheelers’ side mirror shows how Frank, as a Gray Flannel man, wears the same clothes than the rest of commuters, while April awaits him at home where she spends the whole day properly dressed to make the home chores. This scene shows how they have accommodated to the stereotypical

couples of suburban lifestyle. The Wheelers' home stands out among the other houses of Revolutionary Road. It is located upon a hill as if it was predestinated to them, those who were supposed to be a model for the rest of the suburban families and be admired by them, as John Winthrop thought was the destiny of the first Puritans in the New World. As Mrs. Givings, the real estate agent, confirms, "you weren't like the most of the clients, you were different somehow. ...You just seemed special." Thus Frank and April become a model suburban couple to the eyes of their neighbours. This is apparently positive because they even believe to be what the others say they are, but the internal problems will soon appear and transform that ideal couple, while their perfect house will turn into a golden cage from which they will not be able to escape.

The house becomes a space where everything that must be hidden explodes. Its external appearance and the couple's interest for displaying a perfect life are forgotten once the doorsteps are crossed and the family internal realities are faced. The house's interior defines the characters' perceptions of themselves and becomes a place showing a reality that differs from to the ideal of the 1950s that defined the family suburban house as a refuge where the breadwinner could relax and spend time for himself after a hard day's work while his wife cooked the supper and looked after the children. Elaine May argues that the philosophy of the 1950s understood the home as an institution that would "diffuse the potential for social unrest." (May 1988:164). In the film, however, the suburban home becomes a claustrophobic place hardly containing all the relatives' emotions and feelings inside its walls, away from the public eye to keep appearances.

Frank and April as members of the suburban society suffer the need of obscuring their domestic realities and portray the image of the perfect couple people consider they are, but the great difference between them is that April is not willing to keep on hiding her reality any more, while Frank fears to lose the conformity he has because he fits the

stereotype of a Gray Flannel Rebel. He lives by the rules and has accomplished what it is considered the right behaviour for a man in the 1950s:

Make sure they marry young, make sure they have a wife and children very early. Once a man has a wife and two children, he will do what you tell him to. He will obey you. And that is the aim of the entire masculine role. (Vidal 1980) (Quoted in Ehrenreich 1983: 29)

Frank has a white-collar job at the Sales Promotion Department of Knox Business Machines, he has bought a house in Revolutionary Road and he is considered a mature and successful male breadwinner as a result. He represents 'conformity', a problem suffered by those who were considered 'too affluent', "a masculine equivalent of what Betty Friedan would soon describe as 'the problem without name'" (Ehrenreich 1983: 30). Although Frank has fitted what is considered the 'right male role,' he does not forget his internal reality where he keeps his youth anecdotes and dreams. However, he pretends to go further with the ideal of 1950s and conform to it, although he perfectly knows his job at Knox is a stupid occupation where he just tries to maintain himself busy.

On the other hand, April Wheeler has left apart his bohemian life to fit the stereotype of the perfect woman in the 1950s, she is housewife and mother, i.e. the 'angel at home'. She has become a suburban housewife, described by Friedan as the main role that unfortunately a woman can only aspire to:

She was the dream image of the young America women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife... She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to

man in his world...She had everything that women ever dreamed of.

(Friedan 2010: 7-8)

But April's internal reality is dominated by her dissatisfaction; she feels alone and empty somehow because society has forced her to take a role that she does not like. That image of the 'Happy Housewife Heroine' (Friedan 2010: 21) was created by the media, mainly by magazines and advertisements but also by books written by experts on marriage and the family. The successful *McCalls Magazine* portrayed the perfect woman as "young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home" (Friedan 2010: 23). But April is not happy in that world. She is feeling that mystique Friedan talks about in her work: 'the problem that has no name'. She is trying to put her problem into words but she cannot. The film shows April's dissatisfaction with fitting the role of women in the 1950s when she is shown doing her home chores, feeling exhausted. She is not "content in a world of bedroom and kitchen" as Friedan criticized (Friedan 2010: 23), that is the reason why she is going to realise she needs a change in her life.

Her dissatisfaction is what makes her miss her previous life, when she could never have imagined that she was going to become a mother and a housewife instead of an actress, or that Frank was never going to be the 'other-directed' man he is now. A flashback shows an even younger April when, together with an also younger Frank, looked casual and excited about finding a new home. They were young but April's accidental pregnancy made them change their lives and start the process of a premature maturity. The kind of bohemian life they were living was far distanced from a mature adulthood as it was understood in the 1950s. To become a mature person you have to accomplish the different tasks established by psychologist R. J. Havighurst in 1953 and

known as the 'eight developmental tasks of early adulthood': 1. Selecting a mate, 2. Learning to live with your partner, 3. Starting a family, 4. Rearing children, 5. Managing a home, 6. Getting started in an occupation, 7. Taking on civic responsibilities and 8. Finding a congenial social group (Ehrenreich 1983: 18). The Wheelers, as the rest of the American couples, knew which member of the couple was in charge of accomplishing the different tasks, as has been explained before. Frank had lived in an apartment in Greenwich Village as a rebel, but April's pregnancy made him aware of the real world. She seems to have a strong disagreement with that new life conception that Frank gains because he is a conformist, as has been explained before. That conformism is understood in the 1950s as an acceptance of the adult sex roles and as a sign of maturity (Ehrenreich 1983: 17). On the other hand, April, the one that is in a doubtful situation about the role she has to fit, is considered immature by contemporary standards because she resents doing what a women is supposed to do. But if she becomes a mother and gets married, she will be trapped in what Charlot Perkins Gilman, a feminist writer and lecturer, names as a 'sexuo-economic relation' (Ehrenreich 1983: 5) a relation in which the man 'pays' the woman for the domestic tasks she performs, i.e. April's premature maturity implies to forget about her artistic aspirations, accept her new role and become economically dependent on Frank.

April Wheeler's Rebirth

Although it is difficult for her to assimilate what she is feeling, April is going to try to escape from what makes her feel entrapped. She is going to realize she does not have a life, or at least the life one day she wanted to have. April knows she is experiencing a failure in adapting to the suburban lifestyle. When she finds the picture

of Frank and Shep in Paris she remembers the first time she found it in Frank's apartment when they were dating. That past scene is brought in through a new flashback. The context was completely different and Frank was the kind of man she misses now. The way he dressed and his words suggest he was a completely different man. He wanted to live experiences, "all I know is that I want to feel things. Really feel them." This recollection "clicks" on April's head and motivates her fight for a needed change that will help them escape from suburbia and start a new life in Paris where she can become a working mother.

As has been explained before, April's life is a failed performance: on the stage and in her own home. Both situations are linked and the audience becomes aware of April's artificial performance in them. What Rikke Aaserød Øisang uses to exemplify April's artificial performance in her everyday life is the scene in which she has prepared a happy birthday dinner and put a nice dress to tell Frank her plans after a day at work.

Gradually, April is more concerned about her own happiness far from the walls of her home and putting less effort in her domestic performance. Her reluctance to do the home chores becomes evident when in the film she is overwhelmed at home because of all the stuff she has to tidy up before Helen Givings' visit. April feels physically and emotionally exhausted with every passing moment at home. An example that makes clear that April has realised her happiness lies somewhere out there is the scene in which she runs into the forest in the opposite direction of the house, symbolizing that everything that takes place there damages her integrity.

When Frank is told about the new plan, he shows a reluctant attitude but once again, she uses her weapons of failed actress and tries to convince him by explaining that this is his opportunity to finally 'find himself'. "You'll have time to find out what it is that you actually want to do... You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the

world...you're a man," says April touching Frank's face in order to sound more reliable.

The suburban masculinity and the fear of the suburban male to be 'lesser of a man' is a recurrent issue in Frank's characterization in the film. Frank almost became hysterical when April questioned his masculinity in the car fight, "Look at you! Look at you, and tell me how by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!" After that episode, he has focused his efforts on looking masculine. For example, to reassure his masculinity he starts an affair with Maureen, a young twenty-three year old secretary at Knox. When he is with her, he builds a false life to make him a very interesting man saying "You know something? You're lucky to meet me." The scenes with his lover reinforces April's idea about Frank's inability to find himself because, for her, he has been brainwashed into the social dictates of masculinity that often conflates with an uncontrollable virility. April just wants to move anywhere far from the suburban lifestyle and begin a new life together with the Frank she fell in love with, and not with the conformist she is sharing her life with. The medium shots used during the conversation in the privacy of their bedroom are perfect to analyse Frank's reaction after April's words. What Frank understands about what April says is totally different from what she really means. Frank's ego is boosted thanks to April's words because he understands April considers him superior to her, just for being a man. The moment in which they are having sex in the kitchen also shows Frank's intention of controlling everything. April is aware of a new unwanted pregnancy that could dismantle her plans. A close-up shows April's face while making an almost inaudible "...No". She knows she can get pregnant but Frank does not consider it, he is just considering his own pleasure and desire.

Dismantling the Game of Appearances

The Campbells are the married couple that lives next to the Wheelers. Frank and Shep are old friends; they were together in the battlefield. Now he is married to Milly and is the father of four boys. While they are getting ready for their meeting with Frank and April, they show their efforts to be great hosts and to present themselves as a happy and beautiful couple, at least, as beautiful and especial as the Wheelers are. Shep, as well as Frank, has completed the different tasks or stages necessary to reach male adulthood: he has built a family and fitted the role of breadwinner, but it is clear that he will never achieve self-fulfillment unless he will be with April, the woman he is really loves. Moreover, being the father of four does not make him happy either, since he knows his children do not care about him. This contradicts the idea about the family in 1950s in which the number of four children was the ideal one.

The meeting turns into a party of appearances: Milly tries to please her guests with the delicatessen she has been preparing for the whole afternoon, to prove them that she is a perfect cook and housewife. The show of the Campbells' false happiness continues when they are told about their friends' plan to move to Paris, "it sounds beautiful, kids. I mean it; it really sounds wonderful. We'll certainly miss you, though-won't be sweetie?"

Later that night, Milly and Shep are going to play the scene that evinces that the Wheeler's are not unique in their dissatisfaction. Milly and Shep will laugh at the Wheelers' plan in the privacy of their bedroom, while Milly will start to cry without any apparent reason, or that is what Shep is going to believe. The problem is one: She feels as empty as April does, and the news has made her realize she is going to stay trapped besides Shep the rest of her life. Because she does not consider herself as lucky as

April, she knows that she is not going to find a solution to escape from what has made her an unhappy woman.

Another important couple in the film with whom the Wheelers have several meetings is the Givings. They are the married couple formed by Helen, the real estate agent and her husband Howard. They are a mature couple with a son, John. Helen Givings is a woman who has chosen conformity to suburban pressure over any other alternative. This is clear if we think that her job is to sell wonderful suburban houses where young couples can raise a happy family, but the truth is that she is an unhappy woman too, one who has lived all her life complying with social expectations about gender roles and who has found work outside home, something very rare for a woman in the 1950s, to escape from her life at home. In the novel we learn that she got married to Howard “the only man who’d ever asked her to marry him” (Yates 2007: 165) and now she cannot gain his attention anymore, but she has to continue next to him despite the evidence that he cannot stand her at all.

John Givings is an important figure inside the story. He seems to be the only person in the community that understands and gives voice to April’s internal reality. He, as patient of a psychiatric hospital, is honest and says the ugly truth whenever he considers it must be said, especially when he cannot stand his mother’s good manners “Ma, how about doing everybody a favor? How about shutting up!” Because he does not behave like the rest, his sincere and opened behavior is considered insane at a time when the popularization of Freudian ideas were used as instruments to pathologize any deviant attitude from the norm.

John likes April’s way of thinking, because she is now portraying herself as a woman who makes decisions by herself and not to fit the role imposed by the conformist and conservative society of the 1950s. On the other side, he seems not to like

Frank pretty much, especially when he gives him the reasons why they have decided to move to Paris. John finds it a bit forced when Frank talks about the ‘hopeless emptiness’ of the life in suburbia, referring to the idea that they are trying to escape from what they do not like: the conformity and the stereotyped lifestyle they seem unable to fit in. John knows Frank has tried to be very charming by showing his new way of thinking using those words. That is what John is going to criticize once the Wheelers tell the Givings that they are not going to anywhere because of Franks’ cowardice “What happened, Frank? You’ve figured is more comfy here in the old Hopeless Emptiness after all, or...?” John hates that hopeless emptiness that his parents decided to adopt as their way of life. That is probably the reason why he hates them and why he always thinks just the opposite than they do. John’s case can be associated with April’s decision of becoming an actress. By reading the novel, it is easy to conclude that April’s dream was not to become a successful actress but to be a dreamer and fight for whatever she finds interesting in life as a mechanism to forget her past and to avoid committing the same mistakes her relatives committed in their lives.

In the first Wheelers-Givings get-together, April and Frank enjoy John’s company. Meeting him has made them feel alive, and the best thing is that they feel understood by somebody for the first time since their decision to change their lives.

April: “he is the first person who seemed to know what we were talking about” Frank: “That’s true. Maybe we are just as crazy as he is”

April: “if being crazy means living life as if it matters then I don’t care if we are completely insane.”

According to Aaserød Øisang, John Givings symbolizes the forced silence of the counterculture voices in the decade. John’s uncomfortable truth is silenced by confining him to an insane hospital. (Aaserød Øisang 2012: 31). The Givings endorse the

instrumentalization of Freudian ideas 1950s that would diagnose as insane or neurotic any behavior against the established norm, to the point of destroying their own son's life and brilliant future.

They believe that his meeting with the Wheelers is what made April turn into an 'insane' woman leading her to her fatal ending. But what they do not want to realise is that it is not John what hurts April but the American social norms and the pressure to conform that do not let her live as she wants. Aaserød Øisang (2012: 32) also connects John confinement with the censorship of the elements that society disliked or the people who did not fit in the culture of the 1950s.

No Escape: A Deadly Rebellion

The news of her unwanted pregnancy makes April realize that it can spoil their plans to move to Paris, and she is not wrong. Several days later Frank meets Mr. Pollock, Knox Business Machines chief, who offers him a tempting job offer. Firstly, Frank tries to explain him that he is about to leave the country but Mr. Pollock uses his businessman weapons to convince Frank, who ends up the meeting considering the offer seriously. Later, in another Wheelers-Campbells' meeting on the beach Frank tries to convince the others that he is hesitating about accepting the job offer, but he knows he has already made a decision: to stay in America. April cannot believe Frank's decision, which has made her to confirm what a coward Frank is, and the most important thing, that she has lost the opportunity to escape from there. April's disillusionment makes Frank to adopt a very male chauvinist tone to explain that because he is the man, he has the right to make the decisions concerning the family and the new baby. Here, Frank

wants to prove to himself, and to April, that he is superior to her, revealing his fear of castration once more.

The argument reaches its top when Frank finds a brown paper package containing a rubber syringe, hidden among the towels. When he finds out what it means, he goes crazy. He has just discovered April's intention of committing self-abortion with that rubber syringe. That item symbolises April's rebellion against the domesticity and gender ideology of 1950s. Now she knows that Frank is not willing to help her escape from suburbia. But she is not going to resign to live entrapped the rest of her life, doing what the others want her to do. So she realizes that to stop the unwanted pregnancy is a decision she must make by herself. April has just begun to express her autonomous voice for the first time. She is not going to accept Frank's decision and she is going to turn into a defiant woman.

The abortion plan can be understood as a metaphor. Aaserød Øisang (2012: 42) describes April's intention of committing self-abortion as something more complex than a physical action, but as a plan that affects the nuclear family unit, which has a strong significance in the U.S. during the 1950s where one of the nuclear family functions was to act as a shield against Soviet subversion and its influence. For this reason, April not only wants to get rid of a baby she does not desire, but she wants to demonstrate she is not in favor of that togetherness ideology that converted the decade into a paranoid one.

Frank is very critical about April's attitude towards their children and motherhood, precisely when she confirms her previous intentions of abortion when she got pregnant of her first child, Jennifer. "You make it sound like having children is a punishment...you just said your daughter was a mistake". Frank begins to accuse April of being an insane woman just because she has considered the option of abortion, "April, a normal woman, a normal sane mother doesn't buy herself a piece of rubber

tubing to give herself and abortion so she can, go live out some God damn fantasy...and maybe we should get someone to help you think about it". Frank's words show the effects of Freudian psychoanalysis as popular ideology to understand women's behaviour in the first half of the twentieth-century. This rush to psychoanalysis is explained by Friedan (2010: 151) using the term 'Freudian Mania'. She states Americans need for an ideology that explained people problems. Frank is trying to analyse April's behaviour justifying that she is an unnatural woman because she does not want to be a mother or looking after her children. She is representing all the women victims of that Freudian psychology who were not understood just because nobody took into account their real circumstances. Friedan (151) also comments that the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis was so powerful that every attitude or event was analysed under the Freudian microscope and that for that reason mothers began to be blamed for everything, especially if they had a troubled child (alcoholic, schizophrenic...). For this reason, women became the scapegoat of society. However, despite April's real love for her children, she decides to continue with her decision in order to escape from what has converted her into a miserable woman.

After the couple's argument April realizes that her marriage is irremediably broken and changes her behavior. She shows her discontent with her life wherever she goes and does not try to hide it, as she used to. In the Wheelers-Campbells' meeting in a pub, April is absolutely disengaged from the conversation and shows her dislike of the meeting. She cannot think of anything else but the big disillusion of her broken dream. April does not want to be next to Frank and she is not interested in anything he does. She is resigned to be next to him the rest of her life but one thing is clear: she is not going to be the 'angel at home' she used to be, she has decided to live her own life and do whatever she wants to. This change justifies her casual affair with Shep which can be

understood as a kind of revenge against Frank because it is evident she does not like him, nor her lovemaking with Shep, “please, just be quiet for a minute, then you can take me home.”

The critical situation at home makes Frank be afraid of a possible divorce. Ehrenreich (1983: 10) talks about men’s dependence on marriage and it is clear that Frank is dependent on April in a sense that if a divorce comes to terms, he would become a gray flannel rebel without a family; he would not be a breadwinner anymore, and that, in the mind of a conformist, is something to be afraid of. For this reason, he begins to do whatever takes to save the marriage and he decides that being sincere can work. He expects a sympathetic attitude from April when he confesses his infidelity but what he finds is a woman who does not care about her husband’s troubles nor anything that comes from him, “would it be right if we didn’t talk about anything? Can’t we just take each day as it comes and do the best we can, and not feel we have to talk about everything all the time?...Why do you tell me about it?...I don’t feel anything...I don’t think I do (love you) anymore.”

Next morning scene portrays the final moments of the couple together. April is in the kitchen preparing a good breakfast for Frank. “I thought you’d probably want a good breakfast today. I mean it’s a kind of important day for you, isn’t it?” She was right; Frank was going to sign the job offer contract. The change in April’s attitude is strange because it seems that she has decided to adopt the role of an ideal housewife again and resign herself to that way of living to enhance her husband’s working skills “You should value what you do Frank. You’re obviously good at it”, but the April’s true intentions go far from satisfying her husband. The only thing she wants is to feel satisfied for the first time by making her own decision and reclaiming her sense of

dignity because April is going to do something she really believes in despite the fact that her life is at great risk: she is going to commit self-abortion.

April is going to die in the silence of a home furnished with commodities that symbolises the fact that consumerism does not bring happiness nor freedom to women in 1950s. For this reason, April's abortion of her unwanted baby also can be understood as the abortion of the suburban lifestyle of the American 1950s as the last thing left to her to escape from that entrapment.

The end of the film shows two important scenes played by Frank and the Givings. The scene in which Frank is alone in a park with his two kids represents the sense of solitude of a man that has lost almost everything he had and that is silenced for the first time, once his acts and the conformist attitude he decided to adopt has silenced his wife forever. The second and last scene of the film portrays the Givings couple in the living room of their home. The moment in which Howard turns off his hearing aid when Helen talks about the Wheelers emphasises the real lack of communication between a couple that cannot stand each other but that had decided to continue together because that was the right thing to do in the decade.

Conclusion

The above analysis of gender and social relation in Sam Mendes' *Revolutionary Road* uncovers a critique of the 1950s conformism. Although 1950s are often remembered as a happy decade where people experienced the advantages of the economic growth, the text proves that the decade was not as innocent as the media and films tried to portray. As I have tried to explain, the American 1950s were a difficult decade for many reasons, to both women and men.

In *Revolutionary Road* the general idea about gender and social relations in the 1950s turns around the figures of Frank and April Wheeler. The film portrays a couple that represents the internal and external conflicts that a suburban couple may have. Frank represents all the Gray Flannel Rebels, the 'other-directed' men that Riesman defines as those that conformed to the rules and were influenced by the media, while April represents all the entrapped women that were consumed by the anxiety of following what other dictates. Her decision to carry out self-abortion despite her husband's disagreement is meant not only to stop her unwanted pregnancy but also as the only way to escape from the conservative American society represented by suburban family and suburban ideals.

I have concluded that women in the 1950s suffered a failure in adaption to a world that does not give them a decent place, what Friedan called 'the problem that as no name' in the domestic space of the 'suburban home' that the film represents as a golden cage where couples struggled to hide the internal conflicts and to portray a model image of themselves. Women soon realised they could not stand that situation and were going to seek any solution to escape from the entrapment they suffered at

home, while men's fear of emasculation and conformist attitude towards that conservative lifestyle also confines them to a miserable life. Women behaving differently from the norm were going to be considered mentally ill according to the decade's interpretation and use of Freudian psychoanalysis

The phenomenon of Suburban America, central to the Cold War domestic ideology in the 1950s, was considered the perfect place where to build a family. The film, however, presents it as a claustrophobic place limiting individual freedom, growth and aspiration that affect communication and affection between Frank and April, the protagonist couple. The home becomes the scenario where the conflicts between authentic choices and conformity to dictated options take place.

In this way, Mendes's film offers a critique of the Cold War values to attack their flourishing in this century because of the new anxiety and paranoid situations the U.S suffered during the first decade of the twenty-first century after the terrorist attacks of 2001. The difference between the novel and the film resides in the fact that the film also provides a female perspective in order to show perfectly that the restrictions implicit in the traditional gender roles not only do not act as a shield against terrorism or external attacks, as they were used against Soviet subversion in 1950s, but the only effect they had was the empowering of women position because of the adoption of a reactionary thinking.

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